

GENDER AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ROLE OF ARMENIAN WOMEN IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence and consolidation of Armenian women's socio-political agency in the early twentieth century. Building on the foundations of charitable and political associations established in the late nineteenth century, Armenian women expanded their roles through philanthropic initiatives, humanitarian relief, and civic activism, particularly during World War I and the Armenian Genocide. These activities provided the organizational experience and public visibility that facilitated their transition into formal politics.

The proclamation of the First Republic of Armenia in 1918 and the adoption of universal suffrage in 1919, without property or class restrictions, positioned Armenia among the earliest states worldwide to institutionalize gender equality in electoral rights. The election of three women deputies, Perchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan, Varvara Sahakyan-Tadevosyan, and Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan, further exemplified the integration of women into the structures of governance, where they contributed to legislation on education, welfare, public health, and refugee relief.

Comparative analysis situates the Armenian case within the global suffrage timeline, demonstrating its pioneering character relative to the United Kingdom (full suffrage in 1928), the United States (1920), France (1944), and Switzerland (1971). The Armenian experience highlights a distinctive trajectory in which women's charitable activism rapidly evolved into political participation, underscoring the progressive spirit of the First Republic despite its short-lived existence.

Keywords: *gender and politics, women's suffrage; feminist movements; gender roles, Armenian history, Armenian women; First Republic of Armenia; national liberation movements, socio-political activity.*

Introduction

From the second half of the nineteenth century, significant transformations took place in Armenian socio-political life. The gradual penetration of national liberation and European Enlightenment ideas substantially contributed to the changing role of women in Armenian society. The issue of women's education began to surface with greater urgency, leading to the establishment of numerous educational institutions for women and girls. Consequently, Armenian women gradually became engaged in various spheres of public life, moving beyond domestic boundaries to participate in socio-political movements, the national liberation struggle, and membership in clandestine circles and political parties (Bryan & Gibbons, 2022; Zeithlian, 1992).

By the end of the nineteenth century, women's involvement was evident in the formation of Armenian political parties. Notably, Maro Nazarbekian was among the founders of the Hunchakian Party. Women, though not in leading roles, actively contributed to the founding of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). Among them were the Matinyan sisters, Satenik and

Natalia, as well as Daria Goloshian, Maro Zaveryan (sister of ARF co-founder Simon Zaveryan), Anna Sahakyan, Zhenya Adamyan, Natalia Amirkhanyan, and others (Bouzand, 1965).

Armenian women also played an invaluable role in the fedayee (armed resistance) movement and during the years of the Armenian Genocide, both in organizing self-defense battles and in contributing to national recovery. By the beginning of the twentieth century, women had already established a stable presence in both Western and Eastern Armenian socio-political life. They participated actively in charitable organizations that flourished during this period, displaying unprecedented levels of civic engagement. Prominent women figures, such as the public intellectual and activist Zabel Yesayan and Diana Abgar, the first Armenian female diplomat and ambassador to Japan, emerged as leading voices of progress and transformation (Derderian, 2018; Yesayan, 1911/2015).

Women's involvement continued during the First Republic of Armenia (1918-1920). Crucially, as Zeithlian (1992) emphasizes, "as citizens of the Republic of Armenia, women obtained the right to vote, and thus Armenia became the first state to officially recognize women's right to participate in national political life" (p. 192). Armenian women during this period not only enjoyed political rights but also assumed the immense responsibility of state-building, a role often accompanied by deprivation and later persecution. For instance, Bolshevik authorities arrested Manushak Ter-Hakobyan, the wife of Hakob Ter-Hakobyan, a member of the First Republic's parliament, along with her infant child (Bouzand, 1965).

Following the establishment of the Republic, women's contributions were vital to the reconstruction of a war-torn country filled with hundreds of thousands of refugees and orphans. This awareness of responsibility partly explains their integration into the Parliament of the Republic of Armenia, where their role in governance was recognized as indispensable.

Method

This study employed a desk review methodology, relying on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of secondary sources. The research was conducted through the systematic examination of historical documents, archival records, scholarly publications, and memoirs related to the socio-political role of Armenian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Special attention was given to primary sources such as party records, memoirs, and contemporaneous writings, including those of Zabel Yesayan, alongside secondary scholarly analyses on Armenian women's participation in political and national movements (Derderian, 2018; Zeithlian, 1992; Bouzand, 1965).

In addition to national-level analysis, a comparative perspective was integrated to situate Armenian women's experiences within the global suffrage timeline. This involved the use of international scholarship on women's rights movements in Europe, North America, and the Nordic countries (Sulkunen, 2007; Offen, 2000; Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996). By juxtaposing Armenian developments with international cases, the study highlights both the uniqueness and the pioneering character of Armenian women's early suffrage and parliamentary participation.

The desk review method thus enabled the synthesis of diverse historical perspectives and cross-national comparisons, tracing the evolution of Armenian women's engagement in education, political activism, national liberation struggles, and state-building during the First Republic of Armenia, while also assessing Armenia's place in the broader history of global women's movements.

Armenian Women's Suffrage

The struggle for equal rights in the socio-political life of women manifested itself first and foremost in the demand for electoral rights equal to those of men. Globally, the history of women's suffrage dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Offen, 2000; Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996). In the Armenian context, the issue began to emerge at the turn of the twentieth century, although Armenian women were formally granted voting rights as early as the second half of the nineteenth century, following the introduction of municipal self-government in the Russian Empire.

In June 1870, after lengthy deliberations, Tsar Alexander II approved the "City Statute" (*Gorodovoye Polozhenie*), which reformed the municipal self-governing system across the empire (*Vysochayshe utverzhdennoe... 1870/1871*). These reforms reached the cities of the Transcaucasus later in the decade. In September 1879, the first municipal elections in Yerevan were held, and on October 1, the newly elected city *duma* was formally inaugurated (Akopyan, 1978, pp. 83-84; National Archives of Armenia, fond 107, list 1, dos. 1, pp. 1-4; dos. 2, pp. 1-27). The statute provided that municipalities would function autonomously within their authority, yet all decisions remained subject to state approval and oversight (Zakharova, Eklof, & Bushnell, 1992, pp. 221-222).

According to the statute, municipal elections were held every four years by electoral assemblies, and suffrage was based on property qualifications. Eligible voters were divided into three *curiae* depending on taxable property. To stand for election as a *duma* deputy, candidates had to be Russian subjects, at least 25 years of age, and property owners paying municipal taxes in the city (*Vysochayshe utverzhdennoe ... 1870/1871*, pp. 20-25). Each voter held one or two votes, with the possibility of casting an additional vote through proxy.

Importantly, women who met the property requirements were legally entitled to voting rights. However, they could not personally attend elections and were instead obliged to transfer their voting rights through a proxy, usually a male relative (*Vysochayshe utverzhdennoe... 1870/1871*, pp. 5-18). Given the restrictive property census, the number of eligible voters in general and women in particular remained very limited. For example, in 1879 Yerevan's population reached 12,499 (Zelinsky, 1881, pp. 14, 40-41), yet only about 1,500 residents (approximately 10%) had voting rights.

By the early twentieth century, the issue of women's suffrage in Armenian society became more pronounced, particularly through initiatives supported by the Armenian Church, which gave the movement additional institutional grounding (Bournoutian, 2006; Ishkhanian, 2018).

Women's Suffrage in the Armenian Apostolic Church and the First Republic of Armenia

At a time when women in many advanced and "civilized" states were still deprived of the right to vote or stand for election, the Armenian Apostolic Church undertook a progressive initiative by granting women limited suffrage. In the 1905 regulations on parish priest elections, women were allowed to vote in the absence of the male head of household (Mkrtchyan, 2024, p. 68). A year later, on June 30, 1906, Catholicos of All Armenians Mkrtich I Khrimian issued a patriarchal encyclical that extended to women not only the right to vote but also the right to be elected. This important decree granted Armenian women participation in church assemblies and affiliated structures. Nevertheless, due to social and political obstacles, these decisions were not widely implemented.

The issue was reaffirmed on April 7, 1917, when Catholicos Gevorg V Surenyants issued Decree No. 678, explicitly granting women equal voting and candidacy rights alongside men, as well as broader participation in communal and public life. The decree declared:

“From this day onward we recognize the restoration of women’s rights in communal affairs. Every woman has the right, together with men, to participate in all aspects of our public life, in both voting and candidacy. A privilege which, until now, was granted exclusively to men is henceforth recognized as the right of women as well.” (National Archives of Armenia, fond 409, list 1, dos. 4467, pp. 1-2).

However, as there was no independent Armenian state at the time, these rights were applied primarily within the framework of communal and ecclesiastical organizations rather than at the level of national governance.

The situation changed fundamentally after the proclamation of the First Republic of Armenia on May 28, 1918. During its short existence of approximately two and a half years, the republic sought to establish democratic institutions, including the recognition of women’s political rights. Following the establishment of the Armenian National Council and government, the Council decided to form the country’s first parliament (Galoyan & Ghazakhentsyan, 2000, pp. 53-54). The inaugural session of the Armenian Parliament was convened on August 1, 1918, in Yerevan’s City Club building, with Avetik Sahakyan of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation elected as its president (Horizon, August 9, 1918).

Although the first parliament was not formed through general elections, it laid the groundwork for representative governance. On March 31, 1919, the Law on Parliamentary Elections of Armenia was adopted, whose Article 3 granted men and women equal rights in all aspects of the electoral process (Virabyan, 2010, p. 575). According to the Charter on Parliamentary Elections, the parliament was to be elected by the population on the basis of universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage, without gender discrimination, and through a proportional representation system (National Archives of Armenia, fond 198, list 1, dos. 88, p. 1). All citizens of Armenia who had reached the age of 20 by election day were entitled to vote. Thus, women’s suffrage was legally and institutionally equalized with that of men, making Armenia one of the earliest states to grant women full electoral rights without property or class restrictions (Ishkhanian, 2018; Bournoutian, 2006).

Women Deputies in the Parliament of the First Republic of Armenia

The Parliament of the First Republic of Armenia was to consist of 80 deputies, elected under a majoritarian system. Political parties, civic organizations, and national movements submitted their candidate lists for popular vote. The results gave the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) 72 seats, the Socialist Revolutionaries 4 seats, the Ararat Non-Party Peasant Union 1 seat, Muslim (Turkic-Tatar) representatives 2 seats, and Kurds 1 seat (Tasnapean, 1988, p. 131). The parliament officially convened on August 1, 1919, exactly one year after the opening of the Armenian Council (Hovhannisian, 2005, p. 253).

Although no women were elected to the provisional parliament of 1918, the 1919 national elections marked a turning point. For the first time, three Armenian women entered parliament: Perchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan, Varvara (Varya) Sahakyan-Tadevosyan, and Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan. Their candidacies were possible because women were included in the electoral lists of two parties, the ARF and the Socialist Revolutionaries (Stepanyan, 2018, p. 35). The ARF’s 120-member list contained three women: Partizpanyan-Barseghyan (19th), Sahakyan (40th), and

Zalyan-Manukyan (72nd). The Socialist Revolutionary list included Varduhi Shahkhatunyan (24th), who was not ultimately elected (National Archives of Armenia, fond 198, list 1, dos. 7, pp. 1–2).

Perchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan

A teacher and public activist, Partizpanyan-Barseghyan became a member of the Education Committee of Parliament (National Archives of Armenia, fond 198, list 1, dos. 32, p. 9; Hayastani Ashkhatavor, 13-14 August 1919). Beyond her parliamentary work, she devoted immense energy to organizing both material and moral support for refugees, orphans, and famine-stricken populations. She was also actively engaged with the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (ACRNE, known in Armenian as Amercom), which opened a branch in Yerevan and played a pivotal role in saving tens of thousands of orphans (Avetisyan, 2009). Partizpanyan personally adopted a genocide orphan, Surik, exemplifying her humanitarian commitment.

Varvara (Varya) Sahakyan-Tadevosyan

Varvara Sahakyan, wife of ARF leader Avetik Sahakyan (“Father Abraham”), was also elected in 1919. She served on the Education Committee (Ashkhatank, 16 August 1919; National Archives of Armenia, fond 198, list 1, dos. 32, p. 9) and the Labor and Welfare Committee (Hayastani Ashkhatavor, 16 August 1919; National Archives of Armenia, fond 198, list 1, dos. 32, p. 8). Deeply concerned with childhood education, she advocated for the expansion of kindergartens and elementary schools. In a parliamentary session of November 28, 1919, she argued for reallocating budget funds to open additional parallel classes and preschools in areas where existing schools were overcrowded (Harach, 3 December 1919). Her work in the Welfare Committee focused primarily on combating famine and epidemics, which were among the republic’s most urgent challenges.

Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan

Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan, a physician and widow of Aram Manukyan, the principal founder of the First Republic, who died of typhus in January 1919 was also elected to parliament. At the time of her election, she was the mother of an infant daughter. Zalyan-Manukyan served on the Immigration and Reconstruction Committee (National Archives of Armenia, fond 198, list 1, dos. 32, p. 9), the Medical-Sanitary Committee (National Archives of Armenia, fond 198, list 1, dos. 32, p. 11), and a special commission investigating abuses by government officials (Hayastani Ashkhatavor, 19 September 1919). Her background as a physician and social activist made her especially active in humanitarian and health-related legislation, particularly regarding refugees and orphans.

The participation of these three women deputies in the Second Parliament of the First Republic of Armenia was historically significant. Their election demonstrated not only the early recognition of women’s equal political rights in Armenia but also their concrete contributions to state-building, humanitarian relief, public education, and social welfare during one of the most turbulent periods in Armenian history (Ishkhanian, 2018; Bournoutian, 2006).

Comparative Conclusion: Armenian Women Deputies in the Global Suffrage Timeline

The election of three women deputies to the Parliament of the First Republic of Armenia in 1919 Perchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan, Varvara Sahakyan-Tadevosyan, and Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan represented a groundbreaking development not only for Armenian society but also in a broader global perspective. While women in many parts of the world were still fighting for basic

political rights, Armenian women exercised the right to vote and stand for office on equal terms with men, without property or class restrictions.

Globally, women's suffrage movements were advancing unevenly. In New Zealand, women obtained the right to vote in 1893 but could not stand for parliament until 1919 (Dalziel, 1994). In Finland, universal suffrage was introduced in 1906, and women were elected to parliament as early as 1907 (Sulkunen, 2007). In contrast, in the United Kingdom, women over the age of 30 gained the vote in 1918, with full equality only arriving in 1928 (Pugh, 2000). In the United States, women obtained the right to vote with the 19th Amendment in 1920 (Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996). In much of continental Europe, progress came even later: France (1944), Italy (1946), and Switzerland (1971).

In this context, Armenia's adoption of full suffrage in 1919 placed it among the world's pioneers in institutionalizing gender equality in electoral rights. The fact that Armenian women not only voted but also entered parliament underscored the transformative character of the First Republic's democratic experiment. Despite its short-lived existence (1918–1920), the republic's legal and political recognition of women's equal citizenship continues to resonate as a milestone in both Armenian and global suffrage history.

Armenian Women's Participation in Charitable and Civic Organizations in the Early 20th Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Armenian women significantly increased their public activity compared to earlier periods. While their political participation was only emerging, women's activism manifested most visibly in charitable and philanthropic initiatives. From the late nineteenth century onward, and especially in the early twentieth century, women began to establish their own charitable associations alongside broader benevolent institutions.

The 1880s saw the founding of the first Armenian charitable societies. In 1881, the Caucasian Armenian Benevolent Society was established in Tiflis, maintaining active operations for nearly three decades (Leo, 1911). Soon after, the Armenian Women's Benevolent Society was founded in Tiflis, followed by the establishment of the Yerevan Armenian Women's Benevolent Society in 1882 (Psak, June 12, 1882). These organizations laid the groundwork for the institutionalization of women's charitable activity in the Armenian world.

By the early 1900s, the scope and number of charitable institutions increased. Notable among them was the Society for the Dissemination of Useful Knowledge in Yerevan, founded in 1908, which organized annual Christmas tree festivities for poor children, events unprecedented in the city (Khosq, January 25, 1914; *Erivanskie ob'yavleniya*, no. 2, 1909). The Fraternal Aid Committee of Yerevan also arranged Christmas celebrations for orphans (Hovhannisyan, 2018, pp. 170–171).

During this period, pan-Armenian charitable structures were also founded, which developed branches worldwide and, in some cases, continue their work to this day. The most prominent of these was the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), established in Cairo on April 15, 1906, by the noted national leader Boghos Nubar and leading members of the Egyptian-Armenian community (Melkonyan, 2005, p. 15). Women actively participated in the Union's initiatives, making it one of the most influential philanthropic networks of the Armenian world.

Another landmark development was the creation of the Armenian Relief Society (ARS, originally the Armenian Red Cross) in 1910 in New York, under the leadership of ARF activist Khachatur Malumyan (pen name Aknuni). Formed through the unification of Armenian women's

associations in the United States, it became the only Armenian NGO later accredited with consultative status in the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (Armenian Diaspora Encyclopedia, 2003, p. 677). The ARS remains active globally and has operated in Armenia since 1991.

Women's charitable activity intensified during the First World War. On November 30, 1914, in the Yerevan City Hall, Armenian women convened and established the Armenian Women's Association for the Support of Volunteer Units to collect aid for Armenian soldiers fighting at the front (Erivanskie ob'yavleniya, no. 82, 1914; no. 83, 1914; no. 3, 1915). To raise funds, the organization opened a charitable tea house called "A Cup of Tea" in 1915 on Astafyan Street in Yerevan (Erivanskie ob'yavleniya, no. 5, 1915).

The tradition of civic participation continued during the First Republic of Armenia. On March 5, 1920, parliamentarians Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan and Gevorg Khatissian introduced the charter of the Armenian Red Cross Society in parliament (Virabyan, 2010, p. 462). After extended debate, the charter was adopted on March 17, and the first general assembly was convened on March 28 (Harach, March 21 & 25, 1920). The Armenian Red Cross subsequently established branches in Kars, Alexandropol, Vagharshapat, Ashtarak, Jalaloghli, Karakilisa, and Igdir, and coordinated with Armenian Red Cross societies in Tiflis, Constantinople, Paris, and the United States.

Women's leadership in these charitable and civic organizations illustrates the critical role they played in community resilience and nation-building during a period of upheaval. By mobilizing resources for education, social welfare, and wartime relief, Armenian women expanded their socio-political agency, laying the foundations for their later recognition as equal political actors during the First Republic.

Comparative Conclusion: Armenian Women's Civic and Charitable Activism in the Global Context

The rise of Armenian women's civic and charitable activism in the early twentieth century reflected broader global trends in women's movements, where philanthropy and social work often preceded or paralleled the struggle for political suffrage. In many countries, women first gained public visibility through benevolent societies, educational initiatives, and war relief work before achieving full political rights (Offen, 2000; Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996).

In Western Europe, women's charitable societies of the nineteenth century provided the foundation for organized feminist movements that culminated in suffrage reforms in the early twentieth century, for instance, in the United Kingdom (partial suffrage in 1918, equal suffrage in 1928) and France (1944). Similarly, in the United States, women's networks in abolitionist, temperance, and charitable organizations directly supported the suffrage campaigns, culminating in the 19th Amendment of 1920 (Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996). In Finland, women's civic associations played a decisive role in the extension of universal suffrage in 1906, one of the earliest in the world (Sulkunen, 2007).

Within this comparative framework, Armenian women's establishment of independent charitable organizations, such as the Armenian Women's Benevolent Society (1880s), the Armenian General Benevolent Union (1906), and the Armenian Relief Society (1910) placed them within the mainstream of global women's activism. Much like their counterparts in Europe and America, Armenian women leveraged philanthropy and social aid as legitimate avenues of public participation in societies where direct political engagement remained limited.

What makes the Armenian case distinctive, however, is the rapid transition from philanthropic activity to political recognition. While in many states charitable engagement served primarily as a prelude to later suffrage victories, in Armenia the same generation of women who led civic and relief efforts, particularly during World War I and the Armenian Genocide—entered parliament in 1919 with full voting and candidacy rights, decades ahead of women in France, Italy, or Switzerland. Thus, the Armenian experience demonstrates how women’s early charitable activism provided not only moral legitimacy but also practical leadership skills that accelerated their integration into formal political life.

Conclusion

The early twentieth century marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of Armenian women’s socio-political agency. From their initial engagement in educational and charitable societies in the late nineteenth century, women progressively expanded their roles to include philanthropy, humanitarian relief, and ultimately full political participation. The establishment of organizations such as the Armenian Women’s Benevolent Society, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, and the Armenian Relief Society not only positioned Armenian women as central actors in community resilience but also provided them with organizational skills and public visibility that prepared them for later political involvement.

The recognition of women’s suffrage by the First Republic of Armenia in 1919 without property, class, or age-based discrimination beyond adulthood was remarkable both regionally and globally. It was in this context that three women deputies, Perchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan, Varvara Sahakyan-Tadevosyan, and Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan, entered parliament and contributed significantly to legislative work in education, welfare, public health, and refugee relief. Their presence symbolized not only the formal achievement of gender equality in law but also its active realization in practice.

Comparatively, Armenia’s reforms were both pioneering and exceptional. While countries such as New Zealand (1893) and Finland (1906) had taken early steps in granting suffrage, most of Europe lagged behind: British women did not achieve full equality until 1928, French women until 1944, Italians in 1946, and Swiss women only in 1971. The United States ratified women’s suffrage in 1920. In this global context, Armenia’s adoption of universal and equal suffrage in 1919 placed it among the earliest states to institutionalize women’s political equality, underscoring the progressive spirit of its short-lived republic.

Thus, the Armenian case illustrates the rapid trajectory from philanthropy to politics. Women’s early activism in charitable and civic organizations provided the foundation for their recognition as equal citizens and legislators. Even though the First Republic lasted only two and a half years, its recognition of women’s suffrage and election of female deputies remain milestones in both Armenian national history and the global struggle for women’s rights.

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